

Locating Feminist Literary Theory

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In contemporary literary criticism, feminist criticism is one of the most adopted approaches in literary studies. This trend might be explained in light of the recent momentum which the question of women and their civil rights has gained since the introduction of the Internet and the advent of social media, facilitating information access and its subsequent political activism, and, of course, the theoretical bigger picture that feminists could piece together. However, the vogue of this compound case of confusion, viz. where feminism belongs, which cannot be of much ignorance as it may be of bias, testifies to the desperate need of re-locating feminist literary theory. So many questions that come to the fore as a desired fruit of a series of hotly-debated issues impose themselves on the critical scene, regarding legitimacy, categorization, application, and inevitably politics. Henceforth, the carefully acquired information about feminist criticism from Mary Eagleton's *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader* (2011) engages with the researcher's critical postulates of what criticism is and what it should be from a theoretically essentialist point of view. Accordingly, Eagleton's magnum opus is the theoretical frame of reference of the discussion.

Literary scholarship is mainly concerned with two textual processes: writing and reading. For a more accurate perspective on the question of feminism, these two ontologically and critically *essential* processes should receive some historically illuminating light. To begin with, writing modes are often traced back to the antiquity,

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Locating Feminist Literary Theory

Feras S. Muhaidat

especially Plato and his dissident disciple Aristotle. These two philosophers stress the *mimetic* possibilities of imaginative writing which has not been known as literature yet. Actually, they believe that literature has this *creative* capability of *representing* what is there in the world from the writer's point of view, albeit they dispute over what to represent and what not; for Plato, it is a matter of truthfulness which is metaphysically unattainable, while Aristotle emphasizes the probability principle or what should be. And here lies Aristotle's appeal to artists because he leaves the door ajar for them to manipulate reality as their imagination goes. But this Aristotelian theory that goes prospectively viral forces writers to follow certain "rules", so to speak, such as those of the unities and character traits of the hero in tragedy or those of the epic form. Nonetheless, as far as women are concerned, they are only allowed to appear *heroically* in a baser form of literature, viz. the comedy. Indeed, their philosophy and culture (the Greeks) rank women lower than men and accordingly deprive them of this privilege of wider favorable artistic representation. Moreover, the Hellenistic culture continue influencing the European cultural scene until as late as the eighteenth century without major structural modification of their mimetic perception of literature.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, a new impulse emerges. This impulse drives the writers inwards, and their works take on an introspective dimension. As literary history makes it clear, this is the right time for women to pick up their pens. The Romantic turn changes the course of the literary history from representing the corporeal world to the individualistically emotional and contemplative. At this juncture, women show a great propensity to assume the

Locating Feminist Literary Theory

Feras S. Muhaidat

sensibility extreme in the equilibrium of the age as men are on the sense extreme. Jane Austen incarnates this dichotomy between rationalism and sentimentalism in her novel *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). At the mimetic phase, women are completely passive, but now they have a margin of literary agency whether as writers or even consumers. However, this does not give them any *real* contribution to literary creation either because they still follow in suit the patriarchal generic literary tradition or because they represent the same part of their lives so much as most other men writers do. So, due to this early stage of women's imitation, there cannot be a genuinely *different* literary tradition of their own.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a detrimental challenge to Romanticism appears, viz. Realism. Only then does the introspective tradition fall out of favor, and the emphasis returns to the physical world despite the fact that the psychological legacy of Romanticism adapts to the narrative potentials of the Realistic novel of the nineteenth century. What is significant to note here is the lagging of women writers behind men who keep experimenting with their tools and materials. The absence of a giant female writer of Dickens's caliber, for instance, though George Eliot could be one but not equal to him, at that time bears witness to the general female ineptness of relatively rapid adjustment to the shift in the writing process in its Realist prime. Nevertheless, women writers blossom during the Modernist phase of writing because of the directional reverse it makes.

So far, no identifiable *genuine* contribution do women make. It is Modernism, a cap term for a host of different worldviews which manifest in several artistic movements all of which are desperate of shattering objective reality and of welcoming a subjective alternative. The socio-political situation at the fin de siècle paves the way

Locating Feminist Literary Theory

Feras S. Muhaidat

for the return of the introvert subjectivity and at times the pathological subjectivity which Lukacs exposes in his aesthetic attack on Modernism. In fact, this pattern of the circular literary history of alternation between the internal and the external peaks of representation is much like that of Vico's not the dialectical one of Hegel's. Anyway, this view of history begets Virginia Woolf, the Modernist counterpart of Jane Austen, who flourishes within almost the same conditions of revolution, defiance, discontent, and maybe despair similar to those after the French Revolution. The self, the mind, and the psyche are the woman's domain, they are her own world in which she really lives on her own. Here is the creative self set free, and the Demogorgon inside is unbound once again. Actually, within this inclusive movement there are many offshoots that thrive at almost the same time from 1890-1940. There are Symbolism, Futurism, Imagism, Vorticism, to name few, none of which is pioneered by a female figure. Yet this period marks the second coming of the female doyenne_ Virginia Woolf. Even though she does not stylistically innovate any noteworthy technique solely used by women writers, she appropriates what Henry James brings from psychology to the literary scene, viz. the stream of consciousness. Even the gaps or silences that contemporary feminist critics and theorists, like Mary Jacobus and Julia Kristeva, celebrate as particularly feminine have been around for two centuries, since Laurence Sterne's masterpiece *Trisrtam Shandy* (1759-1767).

To complicate things even further, during the Postmodern era or late Modernism, the structural techniques and devices, like magical realism, meta-fiction, or schizophrenic style, change to represent a protean or kaleidoscopic reality which yields overwhelming uncertainty and amplifies the personal sense of infinitesimal being or even nothingness. As a result, such circumstances would affect both men and

Locating Feminist Literary Theory

Feras S. Muhaidat

women but in different degrees. Maybe using such *unisex* devices obliterates the possibility of having a gendered style which Woolf's cult propagate. At the end of the day it is a matter of degree rather than a matter of category. As far as writing is concerned, there is no substantial evidence to prove the uniqueness and originality of feminine writing at the macro level or the tradition. In fact, Mary Eagleton suggests how skeptic some feminist theorists, like Ellen Moers and Kristeva, are about the existence of *distinctive* female writing (267), let alone lesbian writing.

Probably enough has been said about writing. To consider the other side of the literary text coin_ the reading process_ Antiquity should be revisited for reading the text which equals evaluating it and in a way reading it critically. From now on, reading is interchangeable with criticism. Back in the heroic and theocratic ages which make most of the Christian era, texts were evaluated according to their moral worth and how they can teach the audience decorum and desired values. Otherwise, the text would be rejected as immoral or improper for the young and, at the later stage, particularly women. Such value judgment is quite impressionistic; however, during the nineteenth century critics could develop the historico-biographical approach which can yield more "objective" results. Relying on collecting facts from the writer's personal life and his times is believed, at the time, to be of great hermeneutic significance. This textual development comes as a direct result of the influence of the German Hermeneutics and the Biblical Higher Criticism which gain critical ground due to their religious implications. But here probably lies the origin of the hyphenated phrase "Author-God". Both *creators* have the potential and actual capability to encode a message which could be of prophetic nature as Auerbach tries to disprove in his monumental "Odysseus' Scar". Henceforth, writers are, in a sense,

Locating Feminist Literary Theory

Feras S. Muhaidat

identified with God the creator in which the appearance of women as equally creative would be "profaning." The urge to get at a stable, provable and identifiable meaning like that in the Bible predominates the critical scene in the nineteenth century. But towards the end of this century and the beginning of the twentieth century, a different view of this objective propensity appears.

This time critics neglect the historical part of the reading process and declare that the "text" has arrived to stay which is what happens almost all through the twentieth century. In fact, in Europe the Russian Formalism buds, which stresses the literariness of the text itself, excluding the possibility of any extra-literary worth of it. This text-oriented interest generates maximum concern with the stylistic and formal devices that "defamiliarize" the text from the mundane everyday life of the reader. At the same time, I. A. Richards in Britain is burdened with his new Practical Criticism, trying to find a theoretical framework for his innovative practice. Actually, his contribution and Eliot's propel even further the Formalist tendency with the literary scholarship in Britain as a stimulus and in America as a response, helping shape the New Critical school of criticism. Indeed, one remaining practice of this Formalist faction is what its proponents suggest as the "close reading" of the text. It is a strategy they follow to unearth the embedded worth of the text which is basically formal and not hermeneutic. The well-known fallacies in criticism are theirs_ the intentional fallacy, the affective fallacy, and the heresy of paraphrase. New Criticism celebrates the structural devices within the text, like irony, tension, paradox, and other tropes, the weaving of which constitutes the artistic totality of the text. So far, there is nothing gendered in the Formalist school which can be solely attributed to either of both sexes. Both can write in the same way, using the same artistic devices. And both can

Locating Feminist Literary Theory

Feras S. Muhaidat

read for these formal dexterities. Hardly ever do New Critics talk about gendered writing or gendered close reading. The textual aspect of criticism does not eclipse in 1950s, but takes on a different color or shade of emphasis. Under the influence of scientism, critics come to realize the more pressing need for a "systemic" notion of their object of study. Structuralism appears. Structuralists extract the essential building blocks of the text and try to show how uniform these blocks are; however, the rigidly reductive enterprise of the Structuralists does not stand its antithetical counterpart, Deconstruction. Deconstruction aims at dismantling the Structuralists' essentialist view of the literary work and stripping it from its canonicity or "logocentricity" which Derrida deconstructs in his *Of Grammatology* (1967). The appearance of the English translation of the book in 1976 makes a revolutionary development within literary criticism and feminism in particular because the translator is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The book has fallen in the right hands. As Spivak translates the book, she appropriates its reading strategies and Derrida's metaphysics of presence for her own feminist *political* purposes. It is again the curse of imitation and appropriation; nothing new save the application. Meanwhile, some other critical approaches are thriving somewhere else. The context returns with psychological and historicist guises.

As far as the psychology of the writer and his characters are concerned, feminists have now a greater hope of redemption. Psychoanalysis seems to be the panacea for their impasse, this is why they employ it for deeper insights into the Self, the internalized complexes, dreams, and their conception of the identity. Freud, Jung, and Lacan are the theoretical saviors of most feminists, like Kristeva and Fetterley, who sound apologetic for the artistic ineptness mentioned above on psychological grounds.

Locating Feminist Literary Theory

Feras S. Muhaidat

In fact, what they try to say is again a shared experience between men and women, but still in varying degrees. Both have traumas, both have nightmarish dreams, both have internalized complexes, both have the collective primal archetypes, and both have problems in perceiving themselves and maintaining a stable self or identity. Likewise, feminists do not spare any possible theoretical concept without being deployed.

Michel Foucault's discourse, and the disruptive notion of history which guarantees him the name of the historian of discontinuity, is also appropriated by feminists to establish their political stand on firm theoretical grounds. Successive attempts have appeared since 1970s, juxtaposing the matriarchal discourse with the androcentric patriarchal one on which feminists rely. In this regard, feminists come up with their most brilliant discursive practice of exposing the immanence Fetterley proposes which is embedded in the masculine text by women. It is discursive because of its formative power over subjectivity; it helps shape or modify the feminine docile subjectivity. Unwriting the patriarchal text and writing back to the institutionalized locus of androcentrism sound similar to the Postcolonial discourse in which the colonized, or recently the subaltern, unwrites the hegemonic text (discourse) and writes back to the colonizer by asserting their own autonomous subjectivity and writing their own discourse. Marxists have their own share of this epistemic pie. The Proles unwrite the bourgeois text and write back to the entrepreneurial center by asserting the precedence of the means of production over the superstructure which the bourgeoisie monopolizes.

To cut the story short, the preliminary question of the location of feminism in the literary criticism as an independently original approach to writing and reading

Locating Feminist Literary Theory

Feras S. Muhaidat

reinforces itself after this brief expository history of the literary critical practice. It is beyond doubt that feminists are well aware of their theoretical shortcomings as Showalter posits in her "Towards a Feminist Poetics". To justify her new "theory" of gynocriticism, she admits that:

The programme of gynocriticism is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to *adapt* male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture. This is comparable to the ethnographer's effort to render the experience of the 'muted' female half of a society, which is described in Shirely Ardener's collection, *Perceiving Women*. Gynocritics is related to feminist research in history, anthropology, psychology and sociology, all of which have developed hypotheses of a female subculture including not only the ascribed status, and the internalised constructs of femininity, but also the occupations, interactions and consciousness of women. p. 224. (emphasis added)

This bulky quotation is foundational for the legitimacy question of feminist literary theory. It shows how anxious and desperate feminists are about their theoretical independence from the male's tradition of theorization. Even in her attempts to find a way out, Showalter embraces what she repudiates, viz. the male theory. She comes out of the frying pan into the fire by repudiating the male's theoretical product in the literary scholarship for another male theory in some other fields or domains of knowledge. Such an indeterminate theoretical position jeopardizes the disciplinary position of feminism within the critical theory at large. It also sheds some revisionary light on some other political approaches, like Marxism and Postcolonialism. But even here we have to be more careful especially with the former because it does not use any tools borrowed from other theories or approaches, while the latter is of much similar position to Feminism. Both need to be re-located *outside* the critical theory due to their failure to devise their own aesthetic strategies of either writing or reading.

Locating Feminist Literary Theory

Feras S. Muhaidat

However, they could retain their places alongside Post-humanism on the table of contents in literary criticism books but under the separate section of "political" or "cultural" approaches just to draw the readers' attention to their *aliterary* or extra-aesthetic nature.

Locating Feminist Literary Theory

Feras S. Muhaidat

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